

# [Fishing Without a Net: Fish Farms and the 2011 Floods](#)

<https://vimeo.com/33711896>

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KHON KAEN – This year’s floods ravaged much of Thailand, leaving over 600 dead and millions displaced. In the Northeast, farmers everywhere are beginning to clean up destroyed crops and prepare for the next harvest season. But while millions of rice farmers await their flood insurance from the government, 2,200 baht per rai of rice field, the hundreds of thousands of fish farmers in the region are not as lucky. With little support from government agencies, only modest discounts offered to them by corporate distributors, and no organizations that offer fish farming insurance, fish farmers are faced with the task of rebuilding their small farms and repurchasing fish on their own. Here in Khon Kaen province, nearly 9,000 fish farms claimed flood damages. None can collect on insurance.

The video above takes a look at the flooding of Tawatchai Farm in Khon Kaen, just one of half a million freshwater fish farms in the country. To learn more about its story, click play.

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## [OP-ED: Solving Isaan's Education Problem](#)

*Guest Contributor: John Draper*

In 2011, the 2010 Ordinary National Education Test (O-NET)

results by province were made available to the public for only the second time in the history of this standardized nationwide test, and students in Northeast Thailand achieved terrible results. This article considers the reasons for these poor academic results, focusing on the subjects of Thai, the de facto national language of Thailand, and English, the main foreign language of Thailand (described as such because neither are included in the constitution). Isaan students are being left behind not only because of a lack of resources or because of malnutrition leading to stunted growth, but because they're learning in the wrong language.



**Grade Nine (O-NET) Academic Results for Thai Language, Academic Year 2010**

No.	Province/Region	No. of Students	Mean	SD	Max	Min
1	Bangkok / Central	42,705	50.6	13.42	92	0
2	Phuket / South	1,727	48.84	12.79	84	14
3	Nontaburi / Central (Greater BKK)	5,741	48.63	12.39	84	12
4	Nakhon Prathom / Central (Greater BKK)	5,634	47.01	13.85	87	0
5	Samut Prakan / Central (Greater BKK)	5,604	46.87	12.3	85	6
6	Samut Songkram / Central	806	46.49	12.42	76	11
7	Chonburi / East	6,241	46.48	12.55	85	2
8	Rayong / East	2,739	46.48	12.35	85	2
9	Songkhla / South	7,336	46.22	14.03	88	6
10	Ratchaburi / Central	3,913	45.7	12.38	83	11
11	Pathum Thani / Central (Greater BKK)	4,271	45.52	12.31	84	0
12	Prachin / North	2,934	45.36	12.83	82	11
13	Trang / South	4,010	45.22	12.97	88	7
14	Chiang Mai / North	10,469	45.18	13.38	84	2
15	Samut Sakhon / Central	1,421	45.12	12.13	82	14
16	Nakhon Srithammarat / South	6,881	44.97	13.03	86	11
17	Petchaburi / Central	2,442	44.91	12.93	81	4
18	Suphan Buri / Central	3,691	44.25	12.73	83	14
19	Trat / East	1,008	44.08	12.76	79	9
20	Lopburi / Central	3,492	44.04	12.68	87	12
21	Nakhon Nayok / Central	1,641	43.83	13.32	83	0
22	Chachengsao / East	2,969	43.7	12.19	79	10
23	Prajubkirikhan / South	2,040	43.68	12.01	80	13
24	Lampang / North	4,704	43.56	13.12	84	4
25	Pranakhon Sri Ayuthaya / Central	2,970	43.54	13.15	84	12
26	Chantaburi / East	2,942	43.35	12.15	86	5
27	Lamphoon / North	2,670	43.26	12.49	78	12
28	Pattaloong / South	2,785	43.2	12.62	86	14
29	Pitsanulok / North	4,682	43.1	13	88	0
30	Uttaradit / North	2,148	43	12.66	80	12
31	Naan / North	3,646	42.92	12.64	89	8
32	Surat thani / South	4,309	42.73	12.66	86	12
33	Choomporn / South	2,100	42.69	11.73	79	8
34	Nakhon Sawan / Central	4,692	42.42	12.93	84	1
35	Ang Tong / Central	1,300	42.42	12.86	77	15
36	Chiang Rai / South	7,132	42.28	12.22	84	11
37	Sing Buri / Central	912	42.2	11.28	78	12
38	Saraburi / Central	2,312	42.19	12.14	82	11
39	Payao / North	3,648	41.93	11.73	79	12
40	Uthaitani / Central	1,579	41.88	12.06	81	10
41	Kanchanaburi / Central	3,060	41.63	11.3	80	12
42	Prachin Buri / East	2,647	41.34	12.3	84	12
43	Udonthani / Northeast	6,980	41.25	12.45	86	0
44	Phang Nga / South	1,164	41.04	11.63	80	12
45	Nakhon Ratchasima / Northeast	14,822	40.79	12.2	84	7
46	Ranong / South	814	40.67	11.68	78	13
47	Rhon Kaen / Northeast	11,798	40.58	12.6	81	3
48	Chainat / Central	1,218	40.54	11.73	76	14
49	Tak / North	2,804	40.49	11.75	87	13
50	Sukhothai / North	3,125	40.3	11.64	84	6
51	Surin / Northeast	7,578	40.04	11.75	79	10
52	Krabi / South	2,143	39.88	11.99	77	8
53	Yasothon / Northeast	2,663	39.83	11.27	78	11
54	Kamphaengpet / North	3,194	39.77	11.45	79	11
55	Petchaboon / Central	4,739	39.55	11.66	85	11
56	Sakhon Nakorn / Northeast	5,765	39.53	11.86	82	9
57	Piehit / North	2,439	39.48	12.07	80	13
58	Mukdahan / Northeast	2,067	39.31	12.01	79	12
59	Ubonratchathani / Northeast	9,445	39.29	11.75	81	7
60	Roi-Et / Northeast	7,217	39.03	11.8	79	8
61	Maha Sarakham / Northeast	6,068	39.02	12.4	83	6
62	Sri-Saket / Northeast	8,826	38.61	11.33	84	11
63	Satun / South	2,031	38.51	11.32	74	10
64	Buriram / Northeast	8,966	38.51	11.73	80	12
65	Loei / Northeast	3,167	38.46	11.91	78	0
66	Nong Khai / Northeast	4,449	38.38	11.27	80	9
67	Amnatcharoen / Northeast	2,349	38.28	10.95	74	10
68	Srakaew / East	2,361	38.21	10.91	73	12
69	Nakhon Phanom / Northeast	3,526	37.72	11.1	79	12
70	Mae Hongson / North	1,439	37.66	11.33	77	13
71	Chaiyaphum / Northeast	6,179	37.24	11.31	80	9
72	Nongbua Lamphu / Northeast	2,318	37.24	10.76	71	10
73	Kalasin / Northeast	5,934	36.98	11.45	79	2
74	Yala / Deep South	3,680	34.67	10.89	86	11
75	Pattani / Deep South	5,687	32.4	10.73	78	0
76	Narathiwat / Deep South	4,657	32.37	10.25	75	9

All four data sets mentioned in this article can be found [here](#).

The statistics are quite clear, and for Isaan parents and educators, extremely worrying. For the Thai language, in 2005, the highest placed Isaan province, Udon Thani, was placed 46 out of 76 provinces, and the lowest ranked Isaan province was Kalasin, ranked 73, with only the war-torn provinces of Yala, Narathiwat and Pattani (in that order) below it. The median score was Loei, ranked 62. Just four years later, in 2010, following at least 300 million baht of teacher training directed by the Ministry of Education, with much of it in the Northeast, the highest placed Isaan province was once again Udon Thani. It placed 43 out of 76 provinces – an improvement of just three spots – and the lowest ranked Isaan province was again Kalasin, which saw no improvement at all and ranked 73. The median score was Maha Sarakham, ranked 61. In plain English, what this means is that rural Isaan students graduating from secondary school tend to have difficulties reading the front page of a Thai newspaper.

Turning to English, a principal gateway language and a prerequisite for entering prestige professional career paths such as medicine, dentistry, pharmacy and engineering, the situation is, in fact, worse. For example, in 2006, the highest placed Isaan province, Udon Thani, was ranked 36<sup>th</sup> out of 76 provinces, and for 2010, the highest ranked Isaan province, once again Udon Thani, placed 35 out of 76 provinces. In other words, Isaan students exist in an even more extreme two-tier education system as regards English, and again, little has changed in five years.

Thus, two conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, as a region, excluding the Deep South, which has periodically suffered the closure of anything from dozens to thousands of schools due to intense violence against both schools and teachers, median

ranking illustrates Isaan has the worst education system as regards teaching both the de facto national language and English. Secondly, this position has not changed significantly in the last five years despite the expenditure of hundreds of millions of baht on teacher training.

Generally speaking, three potential reasons for this phenomenon have appeared in Thailand's newspapers: 1) Isaan (mainly Lao) people [are stupid](#) (though to their credit, most newspapers merely report but do not take this stance); Isaan children [suffer from malnutrition](#), generally acknowledged to be 10% in children under five according to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in [a 2003 report](#); and Isaan children suffer from an apparently 'broken' education system, perhaps due to a lack of resources or poorly trained teachers.

Addressing the issue of intelligence, [a Nation article in July 2011](#) noted, "By region, students in the Northeast had the lowest average [IQ] scores, with 95.99...Students in Bangkok averaged 104.5." One danger would be to correlate this low intelligence with poor academic performance and leave it at that. Indeed, this was the mistake of the British Establishment as regards 'lower races': the British Establishment in India was out-witted by a relatively small coterie of London-trained Indian lawyers into giving up India at least a generation until they were prepared to do so. In the United States, one self-educated African-American versed in Gandhi, Tolstoy and Thoreau sought and gained equality for all races a little later. To sum up, no group of people has ever been proven intrinsically more stupid than another, and so there is no reason to believe that Isaan children are stupid because of their ethnicity.

Turning to the basic issue of nutrition, malnutrition has been found to result in low IQ as well as child deaths. According to the [2009 UNDP Thailand country report](#), "The four provinces classified as most vulnerable with 'significantly negative main food insecurity and nutrition outcomes' are all in the

outer Northeast (Yasothon, Nong Bua Lam Phu, Nong Khai, Nakhon Phanom). The next most vulnerable category includes the rest of the Northeast... In short, nutritional deficiency is a regional problem.” Another factor is large family size (5.7 vs. 4.0 national Thai average), which is a risk factor for malnutrition. Particularly in Northeastern Thailand, several growth-limiting micronutrients and low intakes of energy have been reported in children. Deficits in these micronutrients have been linked to [“reduced linear growth, as well as impaired immune competence, cognition and school performance.”](#) In other words, despite Thailand’s new status as a newly industrialized country, the poorest of the poor are having children who are either cognitively *stunted* (a technical term) due to their lack of a decent nutritional intake, or who die due to mild to moderate malnutrition and its accompanying baggage of infectious diseases.

A lack of “resources”, as noted by newspapers such as *The Nation*, whether trained human resources or equipment such as textbooks or computers, has been another principal reason for poor academic results in Isaan, and *The Nation* ascribes the poor performance on IQ tests to “not enough decent schools, libraries, teachers and education funding, which children in Bangkok have easy access to.” In the English as a Foreign Language setting, a lack of trained human resources and equipment has long been lamented by respected authors such as Joseph A. Foley<sup>[1]</sup>. One major problem was the lack of a regional university with specialist educational majors until the 1960’s, when Khon Kaen University (KKU) formally came into being (in 1962), evolving from the University of Northeast Thailand. At that time, teachers in Isaan were trained in a general curriculum in teachers’ colleges such as in Maha Sarakham, and they served as form teachers at both primary and secondary levels. However, KKU only began offering a specialist BA in Secondary Education in 1969, and its first Master’s degree only came in 1982.

These dates are only a decade behind the development of the Bangkok universities (with Chulalongkorn's Faculty of Education arriving in 1957), but the high number of elite public universities in Bangkok amplifies this difference. Khon Kaen University currently has an entire student body of approximately 34,000 and as the regional university is responsible, together with three smaller universities and around 19 public polytechnics-turned university, for a catchment area of 19 million people. A similar catchment area of 21 million people for Greater Bangkok and its surrounding provinces is represented by a student body of at least 100,000 when counting just the three elite public institutions of Chulalongkorn University, Thammasat University and Mahidol University. In addition, dozens of private universities are also available in the Greater Bangkok area, while recent moves to delist E-sarn University in Khon Kaen due to a diploma-buying scam have thrown a severe light on the quality of education in the Northeast. A further illustration that cuts to the heart of the matter – the quality of education at Khon Kaen University – is that in 2004, I found first year Education majors at the Faculty of Education, i.e., future teachers, unable to decline basic irregular English verbs. [\[iii\]](#)

Having dealt (admittedly quite summarily) with the issue of resource availability in the education system, we turn to the aptly named elephant in the room – the students' first language. Some 50% of ethnic minority Thai students are having to learn Thai as the gateway language for education before they can even get onto English as the gateway language for professional vocations. In national surveys, "[Minority children with poor Standard Thai skills had 50% lower learning results than Thai speaking students in all main subjects](#)", and in this context, almost every one of the 19 million inhabitants of Isaan is from a minority. Furthermore, very little is being done about this state of affairs, despite UNESCO adopting the position since 1953 that the mother tongue must be the first language of education – and in Isaan, this

means Lao (15,000,000 speakers), Khmer (1,400,000 speakers), and Phu Thai (470,000 speakers), and these three are just mentions of languages with populations of around 500,000 or above.

This is not to say that nothing is being done about the elephant in question – a project in the Deep South is introducing Pattani Malay (Yawi) in a dozen pilot schools. Isaan, together with Lao, is being taught in around 17 schools in Khon Kaen province, and for some time Chiang Mai University has been sporting multilingual Thai-English-Northern Thai (Khammuang) signs. However, these are tiny, broadly inconsequential efforts, despite Thailand having formally adopted a stance welcoming plurality or *pahulak* in its 1997 and 2007 constitutions. Regional languages must be given a place in formal education – and that means being taught in parallel with Thai in a way approved by the Ministry of Education. Musings on this issue have been heard coming from the highly respected Royal Institute, which has in theory endorsed a National Language Policy which supports a multilingualism that includes the regional and local languages. Furthermore, former Prime Minister Abhisit himself urged more support for local languages in schools in order to meet the Millennium Development Goals. And for that to happen, Thai must be endorsed as the national language in an amendment to the Thai constitution in order to assuage the quite natural Thai fear of regional separatism. The regional and local languages of Thailand must also be given a place, however, in such an amendment, in a way that sets standards, allocates roles and endorses their position in formal education.

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[\[i\]](#) Foley, J. (2005). English in Thailand. *RELC Journal*, 36(2), 223-34.

[\[ii\]](#) Draper, J. (2004, January). *Acquisition of English "if" conditionals at Khon Kaen University: A diagnostic test of proficiency of 2003-2004 first year students*. Paper presented at the 24<sup>th</sup> Annual Thai TESOL Conference Prioritising Teacher Development, Khon Kaen, Thailand.

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